

Visual recording of an interview of Micheal (Mike) Caldwell, rock climber by Bronson MacDonald, climber and Manager of Ed's Cantina. Interview took place on November 1, 2012 in Mike's living room. Filmed by Brian Brown.

ABSTRACT: Mike Caldwell has extensive experience in climbing in the Estes Park area. Mike has been climbing and guiding in the area since 1972 and is credited with the development of numerous climbing routes on the Lumpy Ridge and in Rocky Mountain National Park. The interview is especially informative as Mr. Caldwell explains in detail the climbing route difficulty grading system, climbing gear, and training and climbing techniques. Mike Caldwell reflects upon the artistic experience which he experiences through the logistics of completing challenging climbs. Mike taught middle school in Loveland for 30 years, won the Mr. Colorado body building competition, and has mentored many area youth in the art of climbing. Mike's son, Tommy Caldwell is a world class climber. Beyond an illustrious career as a mountaineer, Mike is an accomplished fly fisherman and fishing guide.

Interviewer: Hi, my name is Bronson McDonald and I'm working with the Estes Park Valley Library and the Estes Park Museum. We are working on an oral history project of all the climbers in Estes Park. It's going to be the history of each climber starting back when, as far back as the present day climbers that are alive. [This interview is also available in video format, filmed by Brian Brown. The interview was transcribed by Tom Williams with assistance from Alicia Mittelman.]

So today I will be interviewing Mr. Mike Caldwell and he is an amazing climber. He's been here for quite a while and we will get some information about him. Once again, I said that my name is Bronson McDonald and I've been living here in Estes Park since on and off since 1992. I moved here when I was a beginner climber and this is the second place I got to climb at and this is the foundation of my climbing. It is an amazing place to start and learn and there's every single type of climbing. From ice climbing to bouldering and everything in between, trad climbing, sport climbing and I feel very fortunate to live here.

So let me introduce you to Mr. Mike Caldwell and he is going to tell you all about himself and why he is climbing here in Estes Park, Colorado. Hi Mike, my name is Bronson McDonald; it's great to see you again. I've know you since, gosh, 1992 is when I

first met you. So Mike, today we are doing an oral history of climbing in Estes Park and this is for the Estes Park Valley Library and the Estes Park Museum and to introduce yourself I would love it if you can tell me your first and last name, where were you born and what is your birthdate, what month you were born, date and year, and then from there just let me know what your career has been and then we are going to talk about climbing and the history of climbing with you.

Mike Caldwell: My name is Michael Allen Caldwell; I was born in San Jose, California on July 13, 1950. I've lived in Estes Park for; it will be 30 years next June. I started climbing when I was 13 years old. Came out here right after college and we can fill in the details and all of that as much as you would like.

Interviewer: Perfect, I like that. What year did you move to Estes Park?

Mike Caldwell: I moved to Estes in 1982. I lived in Loveland ten years before that.

Interviewer: Nice. When you lived in Loveland did you, you mentioned that you started climbing when you were 13 years old?

Mike Caldwell: Correct.

Interviewer: Where was the first place you started climbing at?

Mike Caldwell: When I was 13 I was a Boy Scout on a trip in the Sierras and we saw some people climbing in the Minarets and they came into our camp site and talked about what they were doing. And as soon as our trip was over I went out and bought a rope and a copy of "Freedom of the Hills" [The Freedom of the Hills, 1961] and talked a bunch of other 13 year olds into risking their lives and off we went.

Interviewer: That's pretty exciting. That's pretty bold. How did your parents take it when you said, "I'm going climbing mom," at 13 years old.

Mike Caldwell: They didn't fully understand what it was [chuckle], what it was I was doing.

Interviewer: I can imagine. So you mentioned that you lived in Loveland before you moved to Estes Park in 1982, what did you do in Loveland?

Mike Caldwell: In Loveland, I moved to Loveland right out of college because I got a middle school teaching job in Loveland and I ended up

teaching in the same district and basically the same building for the entire time. So I taught for 30 years, the first ten years I lived there, the last 20 years I lived in Estes and commuted downhill to teach.

Interviewer: Very nice. What did you teach?

Mike Caldwell: In 30 years, it was more energizing for me to periodically reinvent myself, so I kept certifying in different areas and I never taught math and music, pretty much everything else though.

Interviewer: Very nice, well that's great. So in 1982 you moved up to Estes Park and before that you were living in Loveland and I assume you were coming up to Estes Park all the time to go rock climbing in the Rocky Mountain National Park and the surrounding areas. What brought you here, was it the climbing or was it your job?

Mike Caldwell: When I moved out from California I wanted to teach in a place where I could coach gymnastics and where there was rock climbing, so rock climbing was definitely at least half of the equation. And the gymnastics kind of fizzled because the State of Colorado lost the momentum with gymnastics and so I ended up climbing a whole lot more than I was coaching gymnastics.

Interviewer: Very cool. Did you do gymnastics since you were a young boy also?

Mike Caldwell: I started in college; the high school that I went to didn't have gymnastics. I was a wrestler in high school and at Cal, I went to the University of California at Berkeley, they had the best gymnastics program in the nation and maybe the worst wrestling program in the nation, so I just walked down the hall one day and never came back [laughter].

Interviewer: Oh, that's great. So it sounds like you had quite an athletic career since you were a young boy and then in college you went to wrestling and gymnastics, and as we know, in the climbing world gymnastics is such a huge, and wrestling, huge foundation for climbing and building more like an all-around athlete. And climbing skills are so relative to gymnastic skills; have you found that to be enhancing your climbing abilities?

Mike Caldwell: Well, like most gymnasts I'm kind of vertically challenged and in gymnastics you learn to do a lot of dynamic moves, and so my climbing style involves a lot of leaps and grabs and so forth and it feels like some of the things I did in gymnastics for sure. So yeah, it really has made a difference and flexibility really helps. And I'm still pretty flexible so it stuck with me.

Interviewer: That's good to hear. So now you are living in Estes Park, you move here in 1982 and you have so many rocks surrounding you. What has been your favorite area in Estes Park to climb at? Also I know from knowing you, your history, you have done a lot of route developing. Which route is your favorite, what area? Give me a little history about you climbing in this area.

Mike Caldwell: I love the Diamond [Longs Peak], since I guided for the Colorado Mountain School for a number of years, I believe I've done the Diamond on the order of 50 times. Most on the Casual Route, of course, but I've done six or eight other routes on the Diamond. Several with Tommy [Tommy Caldwell—Mike Caldwell's son] where all I could do is jumar lately, but I started off very focused on the Diamond, I love Lumpy Ridge, particularly Sundance. I've climbed there a lot. I love developing obscure crags in the Park, got some real, some crags that nobody knows about that have got some really good climbs on them up in the Park. I've got them written down so some day they will be more public I suppose. I loved developing the Monastery; have loved developing the Renaissance Canyon over by the Book. One of my favorite routes is on Sundance, Cirque du Soleil, it's a 11d or 12a that Tommy recently repeated and he thought it was hard to protect. When I did it I really fiddled the gear in and it seemed ok at the time. If he says, "It's hard to protect," I kind of take that as a compliment. But there has been an awful lot of new route development and my favorite areas have, I've been here long enough that they've changed. I still love Lumpy Ridge.

Interviewer: Lumpy Ridge is a pretty amazing place. What year did Cirque du Soleil go up?

Mike Caldwell: Cirque du Soleil went up probably in 2003 and it starts up Guillotine, you make the first couple of hard moves on Guillotine, then you branch out right and you follow a real thin RP, there's a two bolt belay just off of Guillotine, then you climb a real long RP

seam that has I think five bolts, carefully dispersed in case you were to rip all the RP's. Because there are some gaps in the cracks and it's .11c right up to this little roof move. The roof move is pretty hard, 11d or 12a. And then the subsequent pitches continue straight up at about the 5.10 or 5.10+ level and finish up pretty much where Kor's Flake finishes. I think that was 2003.

Interviewer: Ok, and how many pitches is this route?

Mike Caldwell: Really four if you stretch out to three independent pitches, yeah, it's four.

Interviewer: That's great. It sounds pretty exciting, I bet especially when your son, who as we know, Tommy is a world renown climber, putting up new routes, putting up first assents all over. And he says to you, "Dad, that route was really hard to protect." That's a huge compliment.

Mike Caldwell: Well you know, I was using a lot of little tri-cams, I think I used a slider nut, I used some ball-nuts, I mean some really exotic pro to sew it up. I don't think Tommy was carrying quite as complete a rack as I was, and that probably made a difference.

Interviewer: Definitely, oh that's pretty neat. So Mike, you said "It's hard to protect," and as we are both climbers we totally understand what that means, but how would you describe "hard to protect" to some common person that has never rock climbed before, that's maybe a huge NFL fan? How would you describe it?

Mike Caldwell: Well when you are leading up the rock with a rope trailing down from you, you need to place solid anchors in the rock and attach the rope to them with carabineers so that you don't fall to the ground, or fall further than you would prefer to fall. So as you climb, you place gear, usually on granite in the cracks. Well this particular crack is very thin and very shallow, so I'm using very tiny protection that doesn't fit in there very well. And I might put a piece of gear that will hold several hundred pounds and hopefully more, every six to ten feet in a crack like that so I can't fall any further than 12 to 20 feet, let's say. But in this particular case, it was difficult getting good gear in frequently, good nuts or good cams in frequently enough to feel real good about it. At least Tommy thought so. I thought I had protected it ok when I did it.

Interviewer: Ok, well that's good, that's good to hear. And a piece of gear for the common person, is that like a little piece of metal that you would slide into a crack and this little piece of metal, it does have attachments and it's completely strong enough to like hold in a sense, a couple of body weights? How would you describe a piece of gear?

Mike Caldwell: Usually we are using little aluminum wedges that you find "V" shaped slots in the crack and you put a "V" shaped wedge in a "V" shaped slot, and since a fall puts a downward force on that nut, the thing should hold. But for some of the very small nuts, the force on the rock is great and the rock can fail. Some of the real small ones, the wires that the aluminum wedges are attached to are so thin that you can break the wires. So it can be sketchy for a variety of reasons.

Interviewer: Oh, that's pretty exciting. So you have done, before Cirque du Soleil you've done a lot of development. You mentioned the Monastery and I remember back in the early '90s hearing about you and another person taking a helicopter or a single engine airplane ride above, flying around looking for crags. Give us a little history of how you would find new areas to develop and then mention what type of development did you do, cause I know Cirque du Soleil was a trad route, meaning you placed gear. Is the Monastery like that also or what type of climbing is the Monastery?

Mike Caldwell: I was not in on the helicopter ride to find the Monastery. Lawrence Stuemke and Todd Jirsa, I believe, Todd's the head of the School Board, President of the School Board here in Estes Park right now. Todd wasn't always just the President of the School Board, he's I believe a pilot as well. But Lawrence and Todd took that airplane flight and discovered this crag up on Storm Mountain years ago. We used to just hike all over the place and anything that looked like it might have a climb on it we'd chase it down and usually it didn't pan out, but occasionally it would. Anyway, Lawrence and Todd discovered the crag and Lawrence started hiking in there and it took a long time for him to find an efficient way to hike in there, it's a pretty good hike. The rocks there do not have many cracks so you cannot protect them traditionally in very many cases. There are a couple of climbs that require some traditional nut placements, but most of the climbs are sports climbs where you are drilling

holes with a Bosch drill and placing in expansion bolts that will hold several thousand pounds. Usually every six to ten feet, so it's a much safer kind of climbing and since it's so safe you can do very very difficult climbs there. And the Monastery has a couple of the hardest climbs in Colorado.

Interviewer: Yes, I've looked at the guide book and I've also climbed there and I've noticed some of the hardest there, it's pretty amazing. Did you ascend some of those?

Mike Caldwell: I bolted; the hardest climb at the Monastery is Grand Old Opry. We originally, the history of Grand Old Opry is we went in there one day and I put anchors at the top and lowered down and was able to wiggle a few little wired pieces of pro into funky little places. It's a radically over hanging wall. We came back a few days later and I, you can tell when you are establishing a route that there are certain good holes near which you will want to place bolts so that you can make the clips. So I put in bolts, about eleven of them I think, on Grand Old Opry. All the bolts by what seemed to be the best holes and then that same day Tommy top roped it once and then ascended on the second try. Now since then, Steve Hong and George Squibb were there that day to witness all of this so that it's not just coming from me, but they. We at the time rated it at 14b; people nowadays are calling it 14b or c. It's a pretty hard climb.

Interviewer: Wow. So as we know the, you and I know the rating scales are. Fourteen B/C in the grand realm, that would be one of the hardest things in this area, hardest type of climbing. Can you describe a little bit about the grading of climbing?

Mike Caldwell: The grading system in the United States uses the Yosemite Decimal System, it started in Yosemite. Just as a starting point, walking on flat ground is Grade 1, walking up a rough trail would be Class 2, scrambling without a rope would be Class 3 and it goes on up to 5th Class climbing where you are placing—you are attaching, you are wearing a rope and you are attaching it to anchors in the rock that catch you if you are going to fall. Originally the easiest 5th Class climbs were called 5.0 and 5.1 was a little harder, 5.2 was a little harder, and originally the scale topped out at 5.9. But then they started doing climbs, mostly in Yosemite but one here by a fellow named George Hurley in

Eldorado [Canyon], that was harder than any of these 5.9s so they invented the Grade of 5.10. Well initially they were unwilling to expand the grades endlessly so they, as harder and harder climbs developed, they would call them 5.10a, 5.10b, 5.10c, and 5.10d, but d was so much harder than a that after d they went to 5.11a. Well as the system continued to progress we've got 5.11a, b, c, d; 5.12a, b, c, d; 5.13a, b, c, d; 5.14a, b, c, d; and now 5.15a and maybe b.

Interviewer: Wow, that is really really impressive. So at the Monastery you put up the Grand Old Opry and at a 5.14 b-c. Super super hard and your son did the first ascent of this and did you belay him when he did the first ascent?

Mike Caldwell: Uh huh.

Interviewer: As a father and son duo, from knowing a little bit about you, you have encouraged your family, you guys have been a super outdoor family. When did you start taking your family out to go rock climbing?

Mike Caldwell: Well, Tommy climbed the "Bowels of the Owls" when he was three in order to fly a kite from the top. We did a lot of little top rope things, there's photos around of Tommy in some real baggy lycra climbing, actually leading after seven, in Yosemite when he was about seven. I was jumaring alongside while somebody else belayed, so I could really evaluate the protection as Tommy put it in. So he was leading when he was seven. From about that time onward we really decided not to pressure him to climb too much, so he tried all the other traditional school based sports. By the time he was twelve or so he had chosen climbing, he was back into it. So we went out and climbed the Diamond together. He didn't lead any of the pitches on the Diamond then but he did climb the Diamond when he was twelve. And from that point on it was just crazy. We built a climbing wall at the middle school that I taught at and he came down to Loveland to attend middle school with me and so he was working out on that wall and talked a whole bunch of friends, many of whom subsequently became really well known climbers, particularly Mike Aldridge and Adam Stack, and John Stack. So they, oh and Mike Wray, so we developed this great climbing team and by the time he was fourteen we had the chance

to go to South America and Europe and he was doing very well then and things just went crazy.

When he was just about to turn sixteen they were holding the Snowbird Invitational over in Snowbird, Utah, which at the time was the world championship. And you could only go by invitation. Tommy had had a real good week climbing in Colorado. That week he had climbed Slice of Life in Rifle and had climbed a couple of real hard climbs in the Logan Canyon with Chris Sharma. We decided to go; we had known Chris since they were both little kids. So we decided to go to Snowbird and get some autographs of his heroes, so we drove out there and the day before they held the Citizens Competition. So we said, "Oh what the heck Tom, why don't you enter the Citizens Comp?" And these comps were, these competitions were setup on the outside of the buildings with 110 feet tall climbs, and some of them were little holes that were glued onto the walls or chipped into the walls. But the main climbing wall where the big competition events were held was like a modern climbing wall where you bolted holds on. Anyway so basically it worked out that Tommy won the Citizens Comp on Saturday and then we discovered that whoever wins the Citizens Comp on Saturday was automatically entered in the Invitational on Sunday. So then he won Snowbird on Sunday and all of a sudden he was on the scene [laughter].

Interviewer: Wow, and what year was that?

Mike Caldwell: '96, I'm guessing, something like.

Interviewer: Ok, that's pretty neat, I mean, that's a, what a great accomplishment to you know be a father and have a son that you start climbing at three years old doing the Bowels of Owls so he can go fly a kite on the top. That's really entertaining. Do you have a picture of that?

Mike Caldwell: You know, we do somewhere, but it was kind of a stormy day and actually the kite took off, we lost it. [laughter]

Interviewer: Oh that's great. And what a neat thing to be able to continue to grow with your son and climb all over the world together and be partners and what a great accomplishment.

Mike Caldwell: Well I was trying to videotape that Snowbird Competition and as they went through the preliminary rounds of the Invitational, Tommy had flashed everything. He was basically the last person to climb in the finals and when I realized he had surpassed the high point, which I believe was J. B. Tribout. Pretty good climber, the camera started shaking, I dropped the camera so I don't [laughter]. Tommy actually topped out on the route but I don't have a shot of that, I was so excited I couldn't believe it [laughter]. As close as I can recall ever to coming to a heart attack.

Interviewer: That's good. You almost close coming to a heart attack watching your son climb. Any close calls in the mountains?

Mike Caldwell: I've been present when there was a lot of other parties parallel to us with serious accidents. Never really had serious, I mean Tommy knocked down a rock one time at the Fortress of Solitude and I needed a couple of stitches. That wasn't any particular big deal. I've held some long falls that Tommy took. When Tommy did Just Do It, at Smith Rock, the protection is very far apart and to have minimal rope drag we had a real skinny rope and it stretched like crazy. And so Tommy took a fall right at the crux where he was maybe 20' above his last piece of protection, but with rope stretching he ended up going about 50' and it was a very safe, clean fall. He's taking much longer falls than that now on the Dawn Wall on El Capitan, but got my attention. It's probably the longest fall I've held.

Interviewer: Wow that definitely would get your attention.

Camera Technician: When it's you kid, gees.

Interviewer: Yeah, and it's your son. Have you ever been struck by lightning or?

Mike Caldwell: I've actually taken ground shocks a number of times and I had an incident on Spearhead where my hair caught fire from static and it burned off the hair on the front of my head. That probably was my closest call actually in the mountains. There were no real injuries. I was guiding on that occasion, so I tied my two clients together and I lowered them down 150' and I was preparing to repel down to them to just get low, as far away from this storm that just blew in with no warning. But before I could repel down to them I had that little fire accident.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness!

Mike Caldwell: But I took a real good ground shock at Enchanted Rock in Texas one time. I was in the lightening position all crouched up and took a little arc through a rock that was near me and all my joints were bent before the shock and they all straightened out [laughter] from the shock. Took this huge jump, totally unintended jump from the ground shock. So those probably would probably count as close calls I guess.

Interviewer: So Mike, you were mentioning about some different obscure areas in the Park and different experiences and you have so much passion about climbing, what are some of these areas? Could you describe some of the places in the Park?

Mike Caldwell: One of my two favorite areas in the Park is a buttress that is to the west of Notchtop on the other side, on the west side of the west gulley. This buttress is probably four to five pitches tall and we've put up a couple of good routes on there. There are at least three more lines there. We called the buttress Point Elway, after Colorado's most illustrious citizen. And all of this development was done with Glenn Dunmire. But the first route did there we called, Student Body Right, which is a four pitch 5.10 plus that has a off width through a roof on it and some great corner climbing and a wonderful finger crack. The base of this buttress is just lush flat grass; I mean it's like climbing off of a golf course. The rock needs a little bit of cleaning but there is ample room for a lot more new routes there. I would sure take some small wires though for any of the other routes. The reason we've done the couple of routes there we've done is because we didn't need tiny RP's. But I think you would need them for the routes that are more to the left. Another thing that we've climbed and really enjoyed is off of Old Fall River Road. If you look up at the spires above Old Fall River Road, one is particularly tall and white and so we call that spire The Great White. I was with a friend named Mick Scarpella and we did a route that starts at the very lowest point of that spire and then finishes on the summit. It's also probably about four pitches and about 5.10+. Wonderful climb and it's clean as a whistle. We did find signs of people having repelled off of it so we were not the first ever to summit that spire, but I'm pretty sure we were the first ones to do the climb we did. You can put up an incredible arete on the south arete of that spire would be an amazing amazing route.

Actually the third one that Tommy and I recently did is up by Box Lake. This is a spire that we called Marathon Man because the round trip hike to Box Lake is 17 miles, so it's a long ways in. But it is a free standing spire that sticks up above Box Lake, the route that we did is probably 11c or d on the south face of that spire. Tommy top roped a couple of 5.13s on it. There are probably a 5.10 wide crack that comes up out of the notch, it's an amazing spire and there's a lot more rock up there. But you sure have to like the hike. [laughter]

Interviewer: It sounds like it, especially 17 miles.

Mike Caldwell: And there was no signs of anybody having ever been on the summit, so we left the summit anchor in. I'm sure we were the first ones ever to be on top of that spire.

Interviewer: That's pretty neat, especially being the first one.

Mike Caldwell: I mean it's almost the magnitude of The Lost Arrow, to show you what a big spire it is. It's a real tall slender shaft with no easy ways up.

Interviewer: How did you find that and where is Box Lake?

Mike Caldwell: Box Lake is up in Wild Basin. It's as you are heading, the last couple of miles to Thunder Lake there's a canyon on the left. It's the canyon that you head up to get to Eagle's Beak and some of those classic mountaineering areas up in there. So it's the same canyon there and it's on the, I believe the spire is actually on the south side of Tanimia Peak, right over Box Lake though.

Interviewer: Oh, very neat. Can you give an example, when say, "pitch," what does a pitch represent on a climb? Like how many feet is that?

Mike Caldwell: A pitch is the distance between belays, which kind of means I need to explain a belay. Belay is where one climber anchors himself and holds the rope to protect the other climber as the other climber proceeds, either up above or in coming up to that climber. A pitch, so a pitch is a rope's length of climbing. If you have two ledges 30' apart, it might only be a 30' pitch, but in many cases you'll have pitches that are really really long because there are no stances from which to belay. One of the things that has evolved in Tommy's style, is even the big walls that he's doing in Yosemite,

he wants all the pitches to be from natural stances to natural stances. So we've got some hugely long ropes. I was up on the Diamond earlier this summer belaying Tommy on a 240', actually 260' pitch, where we had to do some funny logistics tying ropes together so that he could do them all in one pitch.

Interviewer: Wow, that's pretty neat.

Mike Caldwell: Modern day pitches can be 30' long or they can be 260' long or anywhere in between. It's the distance between stances.

Interviewer: Ok, I like that. So the four pitch spires that you were doing could be realistically, you would think it's probably 400' to 600' tall?

Mike Caldwell: Yeah, that would be a good guess, and I would say 500' for both would be right on.

Interviewer: That's pretty neat. So you are hiking 17 miles and then you go climb like 500', 600' and then do you get back that day or are you sleeping overnight?

Mike Caldwell: I have not had to bivy in the Park in a long long time. Bivy is bivouac, sleeping overnight, usually without adequate gear. Very little sleeping and a whole lot of shivering usually. But in the early days when I was here, I wanted every climb to include a bivouac, so we would bivy over the place. I don't believe I've probably bivouaced in the Park in 15 years.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness.

Mike Caldwell: Everything's got to be done in a day.

Interviewer: That's nice, yeah. It seems nice because then you can come home and have dinner. So climbing in Estes Park and you've climbed all over the world, this is your home in Estes Park. How has climbing here in the community, since you've been here, you were climbing here before 1982 when you lived in Loveland. How have you seen the climbing community change and has it been for the good or for the negative? What have you noticed about Estes Park climbing community?

Mike Caldwell: When I first moved to Estes Park, the climbers here were Mike Covington, Steve Komito, Douglas Snively, you know all a bunch of well-known climbers, many of whom I bet will be interviewed

for this project. But there weren't many others. You'd run into people who came in from out of town at the Lumpy Ridge parking lot, but the climbing community centered either around the Colorado Mountain School or around Komito Boots, which in those days was located out at Beaver Point. As time has gone on, and of course there are a lot more climbers. And with the climbing wall at Estes Park Mountain Shop, that's become a focal point. Notchtop [Bakery] is a focal point, Ed's Cantina is a focal point, there are lots of places where climbers meet. And so the climbing community is much more diverse. Not a whole lot of communication though between the rock climbers and the mountaineers. It's kind of split up. In your situation you are probably more of a hub of the community than I am for sure just because you work at Ed's and a lot of them come in there. I bet you've seen a bigger variety of climbers than I do here in town.

Interviewer: Definitely, I think I do. We definitely get a whole variety from the classic alpine mountaineer, ice climber, that whole spectrum, to all the young boulderers, international boulderers. It's pretty fun when a lot of the Japanese or Europeans come over; I definitely see a lot of that. From the time period I've lived here, I've seen a huge change. I can only imagine with your eyes, you have seen from where it's only your group of guys and I assume that every once in a while there would be a couple of girls coming in and out. Where today there is so many more diversity of age and of the sexes, male and female. Does your wife climb with you?

Mike Caldwell: No, in the early days I dragged her up a lot of things that I'm not sure she wanted to be there. We did some multi pitch climbs in Yosemite and when she was working for the Colorado Mountain School, they wanted her to be familiar with a lot of the trips that they took. So she summited a couple of technical and has been up Longs and done a number of things. She has some orthopedic issues right now that are slowing her down but she. A couple of years ago, in fact to celebrate her 60th birthday, she retook up rock climbing and was doing 10c's in the gym. So that was good, she's still little and doesn't have very much to lift and so she did well. In the Estes Park community, particularly as centered around the Mountain Shop, so many of the good climbers have been girls. Page Claassen is a super star. There have been a whole bunch of others who as kids were that close to Page. Really there is an

astounding female climbing community here. I would say that in many ways it surpasses the men's climbing community.

Interviewer: Really, that's pretty neat.

Mike Caldwell: That includes you. [laughter]

Interviewer: Well, I'd like to be one of the old timers. I'd be a little older too. Yeah, it's pretty neat to see the younger girls that are being exposed to climbing and that are getting out there and doing it. And it's pretty neat cause you coached the Estes Park Climbing Team for a while. How did that get started, how many years did you do that, and was your son involved too?

Mike Caldwell: Tommy was older than the age of the kids of the Estes Park Climbing Team, so he was not a part of that. I did it for a couple of years. So many of the kids were doing so many different activities that it was really hard, it was like herding cats. It was just hard keeping everybody together, getting everybody to show up for the meets. And we had a great team when we all showed up, but it was sure hard to get everybody to show up. So we parted ways after a couple of years, but it was a wonderful experience and I still set routes down there. Right now once or twice a week, so I am continuing to spend a lot of time in Mountain Shop.

Interviewer: That's good. You definitely, I really have enjoyed climbing your routes because I notice that you have a really good sequential movement, meaning like it's like a dance flow on the wall. And you have to really think when you are climbing your routes. I have to think a lot when I climb your routes and it's actually, it's beautiful. It's like a choreographed dance which I think is really neat and is always hard.

Mike Caldwell: That gym is steep and so it's hard not to set a route that's harder than you think. I try to rate my climbs a little softer than some of the other people who set there because I think the ratings are really out of control sometimes. Some of the route setters are 6'6" and it's hard for somebody 6'6" to set a route for a fourth grader. And so I do try to keep short people in mind as I set my routes, but I also, I even put required sequences in 5.7s and 5.8s. So if a beginning climber reaches up with their right hand when they should be reaching up with their left hand, they've got a problem.

Interviewer: That is great. I like that, nice. So you've done quite a bit of different things in the climbing world. I mean, and in teaching and you can see that coming through with your setting routes. And then you've been a climbing guide at the Colorado Mountain School, so your life is climbing, primarily.

Mike Caldwell: A little bit of fly fishing.

Interviewer: Oh, Ok. Have you been fly fishing as long as climbing?

Mike Caldwell: Not as long as climbing, but I was given a fly rod by a client who I took to Aconcagua with the Mountain School years ago. So I started fishing my way home from my teaching job in Loveland. So I'd fish my way up the canyon for about 20 years. As my teaching career was winding down I thought I would get into a type of guiding that had fewer liability issues than mountain guiding. So these days I probably guide fly fishing 120 days a year, but I still do mountain type guiding 40 days a year perhaps, something like. A lot of snowshoe trips in the winter time. Some non-technical assents of Longs so I still do Longs several times a summer. I do some technical things on Longs when Tommy needs a belayer. [laughter]

Interviewer: That's great. And you still going to climbing outdoors and how often do you still climb today?

Mike Caldwell: It probably works out to twice a week but I'm much happier when I can do it three or four times a week.

Interviewer: Yeah, I could see that. In your climbing experience, what's the hardest thing you've climbed and then do you see as you become older, is there any decrease in your climbing abilities, are you still finding new things that you, new challenges and are you climbing harder?

Mike Caldwell: Hard comes in so many different forms, it's hard to say what the hardest thing I've climbed is. I did the Rainbow Wall years ago, which is a 5.13 when there weren't too many 5.13s. And it's really more like just a big boulder problem, it's short. That's in Eldorado Canyon. I've done a lot of big walls in Yosemite with some of the people who subsequently became famous. Vern Clevenger and Dale Bard and some of those people. Some of those were pretty hard. My climbing career was interrupted by a body building

career and I got my body weight up to well over 200 pounds, and so in the middle of my climbing career, after climbing with Dale and Vern, I had this fit of craziness where I gained a lot of body weight and gave that a try. I was really trying to see if all this stuff that I'd learned in my exercise physiology classes in college really was going to work or not. Seemed like it did. But I did that for a while and then I got a bicep injury and went back into climbing. While I weighed over 200 pounds I did do some really good mountaineering. Did a really fast ascent of Orizaba, like two hour ascent. Super super fast. Did some things in South America really fast, so I was really into sort of speed mountaineering in those days. Now I'm just climbing for fun, doing a lot of sport climbing. For the last 15 years I've wanted to really feel like I was comfortable on 5.12 and the last seven trips I've made to the climbing gyms in Boulder I've done 5.12s, every trip. So I'm kind of in the middle of a, I'm not sure why it's happening but I'm enjoying it and I'm going to do everything I can to keep it going.

Interviewer: That's awesome, oh my goodness, that is great!

Mike Caldwell: Here we have winter coming on, if the weather lets me I'm going to try to carry over, I've got some outdoor things that I've got my eye on that I want to try and see if I can climb at that level outside. But at least in the gym I'm pulling pretty good for the moment.

Interviewer: That is great to hear. [laughter] If I remember correctly, weren't you Mr. Colorado?

Mike Caldwell: Well that was part of the body building thing, yeah. That was in there.

Interviewer: And exercise physiology classes, what was some of the idea (end of segment) that they were teaching and like thinking about the strength gains. Did that help climbing at all do you think, or did that affect you, that's a lot of weight on your fingers if you weigh 220 pounds.

Mike Caldwell: Right, I was not a good rock climber at over 200 pounds. But a lot of the things that I'm doing with Tommy, like I invented, might not be the right word, but I came up with a plyometric system of grip strength training. Plyometrics is, you will see jumpers use plyometrics or basketball players where they will put a whole row of benches across a gym and the jumpers will start off standing on

a bench, jump down to the floor and right up onto the next bench. Down to the floor and right up onto the next bench. You can rest on top of the benches but when you hit the floor you have to rebound. And the idea is that if you stretch a muscle with impact right before contracting it, you activate more muscle fibers. Well so I had Tommy do a similar thing on the campus board where he starts off on row two, drops to one, rebounds to three. Drops to two, rebounds to four. Drops to three, rebounds to five. So that's a plyometric system, has tremendous injury potential for people who don't have a good strength background. It's not something beginners should try to use in a short cut to getting real strong real fast, because you can really get some finger injuries. But doing it on the biggest rungs on the campus board and it's pretty good. I also came up with a plate loaded gripping machine that I have out in the garage. It's pretty nifty because unlike most gripping machines where your skin gets sore, your skin never gets sore on this thing. You can do it to exercise your fingers or you can really work your thumbs. So it's really good for pinch strength. I have applied my exercise physiology knowledge in a couple of ways that I think Tommy's benefited from. He takes that little, the plated loaded gripping machine with him on trips a lot of the time. He didn't take it with him to Yosemite this time, but he does take it with him, he likes it.

Interviewer: That's really cool. Do you use it also?

Mike Caldwell: I'm climbing often enough and as the years go on I need longer recovery time and so I'm really getting I think all the training I can handle from the cardio and the weight training I do in weight gyms and the two days a week that I spend in climbing gyms. I'm usually pretty creaky for a couple of days after going to the climbing gym. But not using it at the moment, I might though.

Interviewer: Yeah, I can definitely see that, that's really neat. As you mentioned, so I'm curious, you've been climbing for how many years now?

Mike Caldwell: Well since I was 13, that would be 50 years, darn near, 49 years.

Interviewer: Wow, oh that's cool! Wow, that is really neat! And you've seen it change so much. And you were mentioning about your own personal recovery time. As you have been climbing for 49, 50

years, after climbing two days indoors or outdoors, how long does it take for you to recover?

Mike Caldwell: I like 72 hours. If I've had a real hard workout I'm ok in 48 hours, but I might be great in 72 hours.

Interviewer: So all those little projects that you want to ascend, you wait 72 hours after? And this coming winter, spring, any big trips planned?

Mike Caldwell: We may have a grandchild come along then so that's going to take priority when we see how that pregnancy develops. So that's really going to steer the schedule more than anything else. Even though I bolted Psyatomic at the Monastery, I haven't climbed it. I would really like to do Psyatomic.

Interviewer: I think that would be a good goal.

Mike Caldwell: Have you done Psyatomic?

Interviewer: I have fallen off Psyatomic. [laughter] I could do it in two pitches. [laughter] That route is beautiful, it's very very technical and hard and long moves, so I personally am training with a personal trainer one day a week, trying to get my strength up so I can do longer moves. Cause I have a negative 1/8th index. An eighth index is the span between both finger tips, arms stretched out, it measures your height equals.

Mike Caldwell: It's arm span compared to height, and negative one means your arm span is one inch less than you are tall. I have a negative 1/8th index as well.

Interviewer: Whew, so you have to get strong. So I'm working towards that, I have quite a few goals too. I think Psyatomic would be an amazing.

Mike Caldwell: Maybe we ought to team up.

Interviewer: I think that would be great, we could have that, well I turn 40 this year and I've been climbing for 22 years and it's been my goal ever since I was younger, I said, "Awe, when I turn 40, that's when I will climb 5.13. Well I'm 40 so I guess it's time to actually achieve that goal.

Mike Caldwell: To get after it.

Interviewer: So, Phyatomic would be a good step right before 5.13 because I personally think that it might be 5.13.

Mike Caldwell: Well yeah, who knows?

Interviewer: Yeah, it's kind of relevant. I think we should team up and go out there and that would really be fun. So you, what has like the motivation of climbing done for you and is that the biggest part in your life and is it more important than teaching and fly fish guiding. Like how has that kind of wrapped your life all in one?

Mike Caldwell: Whatever I'm doing at the moment is the most important thing that going on. But when I'm climbing, not having a tremendous amount of artistic gifts, it's as close as I come to being artistic, because every climb is different. Solving the problem and fitting your own set of skills into whatever the rock has to offer and then making it all come together, and then maintaining the fitness and all of the dietary things you have to do. Staying healthy, it's an all-encompassing artistic experience. Whether it's mountaineering or easy rock climbing or sport climbing or bouldering, that's really it. It combines sport and art for me in a way that nothing else I can think of does. Fly fishing, not far off though. The mentality is very similar and a lot of good climbers are pretty serious fly fishermen as well.

Interviewer: That's really neat, I like that. Well thank you very much Mike and I look forward to climbing with you one day, Psyatomic. And I'm really excited that you are so passionate about it and you do have such a presence in our community of Estes Park. The younger generation looks up to you, the older generation does, you have made such a mark in our wonderful climbing community in the Rocky Mountain National Park and the surrounding little crags. It's really neat so thank you.

Mike Caldwell: Thank you.

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ABSTRACT: Mike Caldwell has extensive experience in climbing in the Estes Park area. Mike has been climbing and guiding in the area since 1972 and is credited with the

development of numerous climbing routes on the Lumpy Ridge and in Rocky Mountain National Park. The interview is especially informative as Mr. Caldwell explains in detail the climbing route difficulty grading system, climbing gear, and training and climbing techniques. Mike Caldwell reflects upon the artistic experience which he experiences through the logistics of completing challenging climbs. Mike taught middle school in Loveland for 30 years, won the Mr. Colorado body building competition, and has mentored many area youth in the art of climbing. Mike's son, Tommy Caldwell is a world class climber. Beyond an illustrious career as a mountaineer, Mike is an accomplished fly fisherman and fishing guide.